

“What role does social media play in your life? Write about it’s influence - or lack thereof.”

As once stated by Francis Bacon, English philosopher of the 1500’s, “Knowledge is power.” Knowledge comes in all shapes and sizes from every corner of the world. As classically inspiring and simply true this iconic statement might sound, to what extent does this supposed knowledge benefit the greater society? Yes, knowledge is great, but can’t knowledge also lead to devastation? Technological achievements worldwide prove that knowledge can exceed all previous bounds and completely shift the paradigm of modern society. Worldwide innovation following the technological revolution led to the creation of electronics that vastly changed life as humanity knew it from then on.

These advances in technology acted as a catalyst to the revolutionization of communication and increased media exposure. From the telegraph’s debut in 1844 all the way to the rising popularity of Tik Tok in 2019, all new methods of socialization made possible by inventions and innovations have significant influence on the lives of all humans and hold an immense amount of value. The process of curating this digital environment that we know today as “social media” is much more complex and time consuming than any given person may assume.

Without the invention of the internet, modern day social media would not be possible. When networking technology was on the rise, many brilliant scientists and mathematicians took over; thus, a new organization called “ARPA” was born. It consisted of some of the most capable

and dedicated minds in America (Science Media Museum). The internet as we know it to be was able to form because scientist Leonard Kleinrock successfully executed the connecting of computers through a method called “packet switching network”. Fast forward a couple years and we see Steve Jobs creating an entire new company that spurred inspiration for many future creations: the famous... and infamous... Apple Inc. The first Apple computer sold for \$666.66 in 1976 (Gibbs). Fast forward a couple more years and we see groundbreaking computer software and novel chat-rooms where we could connect with people anywhere in the world. One of the most personally relevant social media platforms in my life is Facebook. Facebook was officially released on February 4th, 2004 (History.com Editors). The launch of Facebook inspired many other digital creators and set the stage for many future social media platforms being invented.

With new social media platforms becoming increasingly popular in the early 2000’s, more and more questions can be asked. What purpose do these social media platforms serve to us as a society and what are the consequences of them? In today’s world, social media takes upon many forms. With constant streams of information and stimulation, one might wonder what role this social media truly plays in our lives. In my personal-first-hand experiences with social media, the complexity and versatility of it all can hardly be defined into a brief, concise explanation. There are so many positive and negative aspects of social media to take into consideration. The effects of social media that concern my life can be placed into categories in an exhaustive list: mental health; social situations and relationships; business opportunities; global connectedness; and false living.

One of the most widely acknowledged and biggest concerns of social media is the impact on mental health. The world seems as if it came to a new era: the era of a mass mental health crisis. Extensive research has proven that spending more time on social media does in fact lead to higher rates of depression. “One reason the correlation seems more than coincidental is that an increase in depression occurred in tandem with the rise in smartphone use. A 2017 study of over

half a million eighth through 12th graders found that the number exhibiting high levels of depressive symptoms increased by 33 percent between 2010 and 2015. In the same period, the suicide rate for girls in that age group increased by 65 percent” (Miller, 3-4). Almost every aspect of my mental health is affected by social media. Personally, I have seen many of my peers struggle with mental health, as well as myself. This dilemma can be greatly accredited to the unrealistic expectations we hold for ourselves due to social media’s influence. On popular apps such as Instagram and Snapchat, we see photoshopped models and professional photography. Every snapshot and every video posted on these platforms consists of the best angles and lighting possible. As a young teenage girl, it is difficult to constantly be compared to strangers on the internet. When you compare your behind-the-scenes to everybody else’s highlight reel, your life may not seem as worthy or good as “theirs”. Your reality begins to seem dull and unexciting. Jealousy and fear-of-missing-out are very real occurrences.

With that buildup of sadness and hopelessness, suicide is becoming more relevant, unfortunately. I feel anxious over clicking on most social media apps. I use Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok, and I watch YouTube. All of these social media platforms have their own algorithms and designs which are perfectly curated to keep us hooked; designed to make us feel that rush of dopamine when we use the app so we are unconsciously begging for more. These platforms literally have “attention engineers” hired to make the sites as addicting as possible. This addiction to dopamine spikes is also an addiction to anxiety. On average, people are becoming more and more anxious. I had a period in my life where I valued social media over true interaction with people. Constantly filled with anxiety and dread, I felt lonely and wondered why. Though it was an endless cycle that was inevitably enabled by my social media use, that same use of social media made me feel like I *was* still interacting socially. So as I got less and less face-to-face interaction, my mental health declined. From this personal experience, I realized

that social media causes too many people in the world to become isolated and lonesome. That period in my life came to an end when I was cyberbullied.

Another huge factor in the consequences that social media has on mental health is bullying. As anyone who has gone through schooling systems would know, bullying is all too common. The reality is, cyberbullying is much worse than the typical bullying of the past. With all forms of social media accessible to the young generations, kids have all the tools they need to harass others. It is unmistakably easy to cyberbully. People get “keyboard confidence”, where they feel as though they can say whatever they want because they aren’t face to face with the other person. I was antagonized by mean posts, hateful comments, and threatening text messages when I was younger. The hate I received was amplified because social media is viewable to everyone. I experienced public humiliation and shame. Anything posted on the internet has the ability to live forever which is a considerable difference from typical face-to-face bullying and humiliation.

Since I wasn’t allowed to have Instagram until I was in high school, the only media exposure I had before that was always very casual. All I ever saw was my friend’s silly snapchat photos which were not the true villainous “social media” that harms mental health. When I was finally allowed to create a Facebook “Instagram” account, I realized why my parent’s held off on allowing it. Though it is nice to see what your friends, peers, and acquaintances are up to, the vastness of social media is wicked enough to take all of your happiness, energy, and will to live away from you.

Though social media has quite the negative stigma behind it, there is a considerable amount of positive aspects to it. The transformed social environments created by social media that we have today have generated brand new ways of dealing with social situations and relationships. Communication with people that do not live close to oneself is now possible, as

well as just keeping updated with their lives. People who do not have access to traveling privileges can stay in touch with family easily through social media. Relationships have completely changed in such a way that we can be thousands of miles apart and know everything about each other's lives. Even people who are medically compromised, such as those affected by the crises during the COVID-19 pandemic, were able to stay in touch with loved ones because of social media. An example is my grandma, who is immunocompromised and couldn't be around anyone except her household until she received the vaccine. She used Facebook and video calls to stay in touch with us. Interaction-based use of social media can be entirely neutral on the scales of possible side effects of social media use, even though many people today still use and abuse interactions on social media.

The core social fabric that rules how society works is being completely destroyed and rebuilt. Many people even have internet friends whom they've never met before. This sense of digital community and immense amounts of trust being put into social media relations is something to be weary of. I have had many strangers trying to DM me odd things, or requesting to follow my pages. Though personally I keep my social media exclusive only to people I know in real life, many people do not. I had a friend a year ago who was catfished by a stranger. They eventually blocked the person, but that risk by itself makes me shudder. Anyone at any time could hack your accounts and leak your information, stalk you, and blackmail you. Even with these possibilities lingering in my mind, being in constant contact with my loved ones is something that I won't take for granted. Social media acts as an intermediary between us and the complex world. In my opinion, the best possible outcome of social media is the ability to see our loved ones who live far away without having to travel to them. That is pure magic in my eyes.

Another significant role that social media plays is the newfound endless amount of business opportunities. With social media, the possibilities for my future and for everyone else's future are so vast. When I was younger watching YouTubers, I always imagined myself in their

position. I wanted to be a social media celebrity known for being beautiful and entertaining. Now that I am older, I realize that the plan I curated in my head doesn't necessarily fit what I want in life. But, even though I don't want to do that anymore, so many other people do. The lens for success has completely and drastically evolved into something so different than anything humanity has seen before. Millions of people make a living off of social media. From YouTubers, to Instagram models, to businesses and brands with social media pages, the world of careers has changed. For better or for worse, there are many people in the world who actively rely on social media for income. E-commerce made its way into the common world during these past two decades. From Wendy's comical Twitter account to the small businesses on Instagram, companies and brands now have such widened exposure that they can solely advertise on social media and see great success. Every time I click on a social media platform, I am bombarded with ads and subliminal messages that urge me to buy more and more products. Sometimes, it even works. When my phone tracks what I view and what I want to buy, I see targeted ads that entice me. For example, I have been wanting to purchase a new purse and a new pair of Nike shoes. Suddenly last week, I saw three ads of various shoes and purses being sold online. "Within the last few years, social media platforms have started offering ad services that allow consumers to shop for an item they see on social media with one click. According to Statista, there were an estimated 3.46 billion active mobile social media users worldwide as of July 2019" (Morgan, 5).

In a dying world, social media does have its perks. The sense of global connectedness that I have due to my involvement with social media is quite comforting. We are in the age of information where all the knowledge I'll ever desire is theoretically at the convenience of my fingertips and the click of a button. My use of social media with close friends and peers is actually quite purposeful. I follow many activist accounts that spread fact-checked important information about worldly affairs and overall try to increase social awareness. Digital activism has been a huge part of my life, considering that I am still a minor. Social media allows for

raised awareness of various social issues and can elicit many positive changes. I have posted links to petitions, articles, videos, and many other things. My peers all inspire each other by caring for what is going on in the world. Social media has the ability to completely alter political climates, spread misinformation and disinformation, spread urgent truths, or even end careers. The awareness people have of the world is extreme because of social media. The only real issue with this is possible misguidance and the fostering of unintentional biases. The “media” in general is a very polarized place, where we have to fit into a bilateral category to be accepted. Yet, as an individual, I manage to open my mind to all information and consider many viewpoints before accepting something as fact. Digital literacy is important to me, and more people should be taught how to discern information in a way that does not mislead or misinform. It is inevitable that false information and fake news will circulate social media, but people should be more educated on how to avoid such situations.

The false life that people can portray of themselves on social media is the most harmful consequence. Currently, many people receive happiness from numbers on a screen and not the quality of their real-life days. Many people, including myself, fall into the trap of needing digital validation. This reality is not real. False living is a true concern in the age of social media. Whether others or myself are aware of it, subconsciously or even consciously, we are comparing ourselves. Though this is a natural and human thing to do, we lower our sense of value because something on social media is portrayed as being more valuable than what we have or what we are. As C.S. Lewis said “Comparison is the thief of joy”. Feeling inadequate does tie in with the mental health crisis, but the lifestyle part is disparate. What we see on social media is not real life; the 99% behind the scenes is what we truly are. Humanity was not created to be digitized. Though I enjoy posting myself and cute photos of various things on social media for my friends to see, there is a point where I realize that the things which truly matter in life are right in front of me.

Whether it's Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, Snapchat, or Pinterest, social media plays very particular roles in my life. The impact of social media is a collective affair, where the consequences that affect the entire world also affect me to a certain extent. After a couple years of social media usage, I realize that everybody has very different points of views and ways of living. The influence of social media is very relevant in all perspectives. With social media, masses of people have much more power than in the past. This power can be used and abused. The different categories of life affected by social media (mental health, social situations and relationships, business opportunities, worldly connectedness, and false living) all contribute to a new sense of life that has transformed and will continue to transform worldly affairs such as politics, business, culture, education, careers, innovation and much more. Whether or not somebody uses social media, the effects are so deeply ingrained into society that it is now inescapable. This may be the downfall or uprising of humanity, but that is up to the social media companies and corporations to battle with. For now, the average person uses social media at their own risk using their own discretion.



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